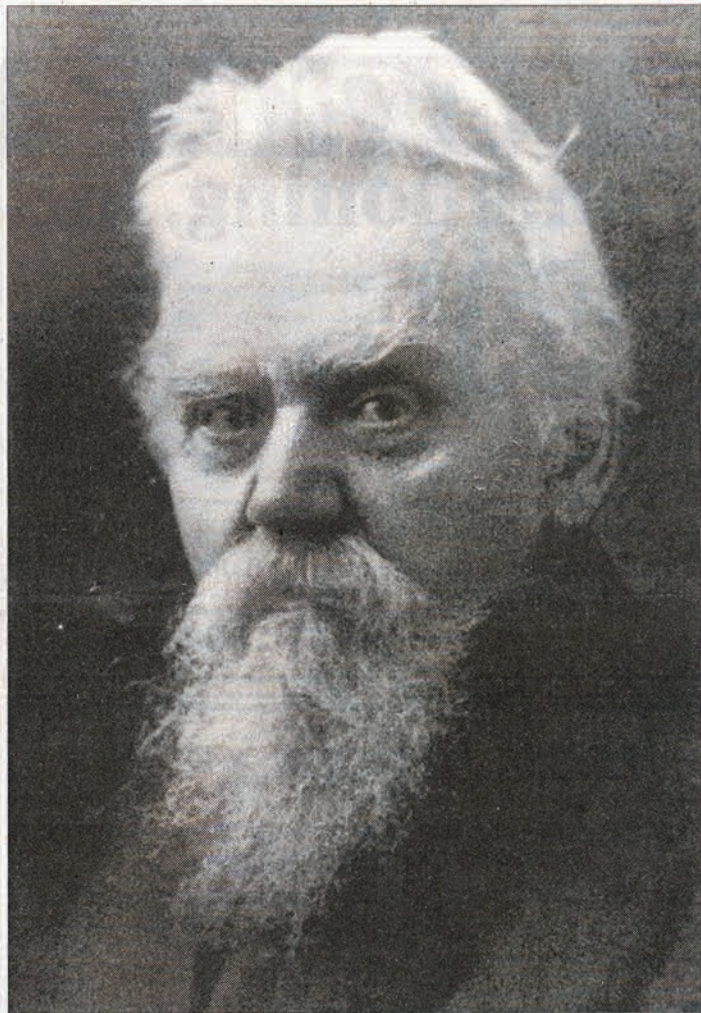


Clearwater Times

A page inspired by the past



JOSEPH GARNETT JR. | Times



Special to the Times

Rebecca Weiss wrote a book about her great-great-uncle, Josef Henschen, titled *A Florida Pioneer*. Henschen helped bring the Orange Belt Railway to St. Petersburg and pushed to name the city after Orange Belt founder Peter Demens' Russian hometown.

An author's relative helped bring the railway here and name St. Petersburg after a Russian city.

BY JON WILSON
Times Staff Writer

BELLEAIR
Swedish-born artist Rebecca Weiss came to live here in 1994, but she wasn't the first in her family to make the trip.

By accident, she discovered that in the 19th century, her great-great-uncle played a huge role in driving the Orange Belt Railway across Florida and south down the Pinellas peninsula toward an obscure settlement that became St. Petersburg.

The knowledge lit a fuse. A peripheral interest in family history turned into a passion.

"I became completely fanatic," Weiss said.

The result: Weiss has written a book about Josef Henschen, based on her original research.

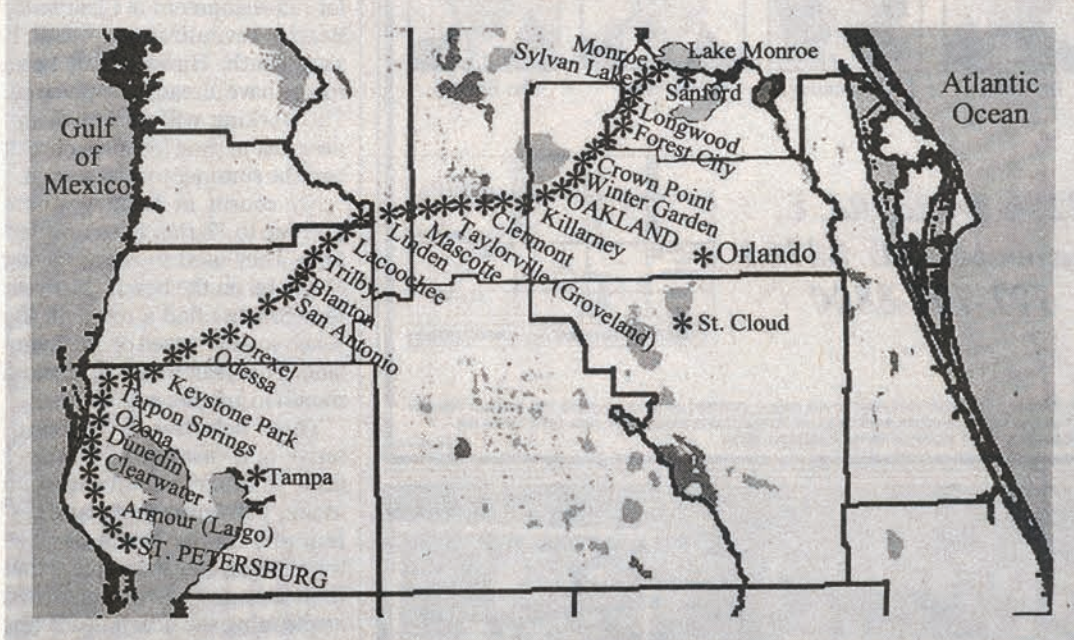
For the first time, it throws light on the man many historic accounts referred to, somewhat mysteriously, as a "winter visitor."

Besides helping to finance a chunk of the railroad, Henschen also pushed to name the unprepossessing village St. Petersburg — after Russia's regal city, the home of Orange Belt front man Peter Demens.

The book, titled *A Florida Pioneer*, began with a 2004 e-mail to Weiss from a distant relative in New Mexico.

That soon led to Weiss' discovery of Henschen's grandson, Joseph Raymond Henschen, a St. Cloud resident. He gave Weiss access to 20 letters his grandfather wrote from Florida between 1871 and 1923.

Written in Swedish to a friend Josef Henschen knew in Sweden, parts of several of the mis-



Special to the Times

This map shows the original route of the Orange Belt Railway from Monroe to St. Petersburg. Josef Henschen helped finance a big chunk of the railroad.

sives described Florida's late 19th century frontier.

Weiss translated all, turning them into an entrancing account of a wild region seen through the eyes of a member of a scholarly, politically active family in Upsala, Sweden.

"They were moving and amazing, and I sometimes cried when I read them," Weiss wrote in the book's introduction.

Not yet 30 and a medical student in Upsala when he decided to come to central Florida, Henschen helped recruit Swedish laborers to work for Henry S. Sanford, a lawyer, diplomat, businessman and developer for whom the city north of Orlando is named.

The Swedes founded a set-

tlement called New Upsala in Seminole County, mentioned in poet Sidney Lanier's 1875 travelogue, *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate and History*.

A friend of Henschen's, Hasse Bergman, painted the Henschen homestead on a lake in the early 1870s. The painting depicts Josef chopping wood and was used as the book's cover.

Henschen describes making trips through the swamp, dealing with wild animals, meeting Seminoles, discovering fossils and overcoming the tribulations of financing a railroad.

Some of his accounts express the homespun wonder of a Florida newcomer: "... you should see the 5-inch spiders which, with my full agreement, eat all the flying and crawling insects in my room," Henschen wrote in

July 1872.

"They move like shadows over the walls. You would be frightened, as I was in the beginning, but you would get used to them, just as I have. Now they are the most normal thing."

Henschen's stories resonate among scholars.

"What a remarkable story of immigration and settlement, sacrifice, privation, perseverance and the American dream," said Gary Mormino, a University of South Florida history professor and co-director of the Florida Studies program.

For Weiss, it is a story that is close to home in more ways than one.

Today, she and her husband, Stu Sjouerman, live within a mile or two of the old Orange Belt rail bed site.